

MAKING SENSE OF ULTRA-REALISM

Ultra-Realism is one of the most exciting and innovative theoretical frameworks to have emerged from criminology in a long time. But its roots in continental philosophy and theoretical psychoanalysis are relatively unfamiliar to the discipline and quite different from its usual intellectual wellsprings. Consequently, ultra-realism has acquired a somewhat unfair reputation for being dense, inaccessible and intimidating to newcomers. Making Sense of Ultra-Realism corrects this in one fell swoop. A mash-up of high theory and popular culture, Kotzé and Lloyd offer the uninitiated a highly accessible guide to ultra-realism, making foreign concepts and terminology familiar by quilting them through movies and television shows such as the Avengers films, Fight Club and Game of Thrones among others. Fun, thought-provoking and intellectually accomplished, it will be useful for established academics and undergraduate students alike. Quite simply, it is the book that ultra-realism needs.

–Dr Thomas Raymen, Associate Professor of Criminology,
Northumbria University, UK

This book is a straightforward and accessible introduction to ultra-realism. This body of theory represents by far the most significant shift in criminological sense-making in recent years. It propels criminology into the twenty-first century, bringing with it a set of new, innovative conceptual frameworks and analytical tools. This text helps students of criminology – both within and outside of formal education – get to grips with ultra-realism. It uses relatable, contemporary examples that will resonate with them, and as such, facilitate their understanding. Theory can often be intimidating, abstract and impenetrable, but this book breaks through all of those barriers. Engaging and approachable texts like this help students see the real-world applications of theory. It shows them how they can use ultra-realism in their studies and beyond to make sense of the late modern world we find ourselves in, and begin to tackle the harms that emerge within it.

–Professor Elizabeth Yardley, Professor of Criminology,
Birmingham City University, UK

An enjoyable book that will be very useful for academics and students interested in exploring ultra-realism. The use of examples from popular culture work effectively to engage the audience and explain complex ideas. Ultra-realism is a theoretical framework with significant scope for development across criminology and the social sciences, and this book provides the opportunity for readers to appreciate its capacity and, I hope, take it in to realms of thinking where it has not previously been used.

–Professor Zoë James, Professor of Criminology,
University of Plymouth, UK

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Contemporary Criminological
Theory Through the Lens of Popular
Culture

BY

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Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Howard House, Wagon Lane, Bingley BD16 1WA, UK

First edition 2022

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-80117-170-0 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-80117-169-4 (Online)
ISBN: 978-1-80117-171-7 (Epub)



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ISO 14001



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FOREWORD

Ultra-realism was really born of frustration. For us, much of criminology is polluted by out-of-date ideas and the sort of dour abstracted empiricism that fills databases with little more than quantified confirmation bias. What should be a field of dynamism, creativity and revealing intellectual discovery is beset by a range of tranquilising conventions that actively prevent the discipline moving forward to better represent the complex realities that today surround the abstract concepts of crime, harm and victimisation. Strapped firmly to the unchallengeable domain assumptions forced by various cultural activists to the forefront of the discipline, ultra-realists decided that the criminological agenda looks badly misaligned with popular social and political concerns.

Our project began quite simply as an attempt to represent more accurately the world in which people experience crime and harm and in which politicians and social administrators react. The early ultra-realists felt weighed down by the discipline's tendency to focus almost exclusively on social reaction rather than the contexts that underpinned crime and harm. These contexts needed to be revisited because political, economic, cultural and social life had changed quite substantially since the times in which the discipline's most influential texts had been written. Early ultra-realists knew that the suggestion to revisit what had become sacred ground might upset vested interests within the discipline, but they were unprepared for the hostility of the reaction that ensued. We were resilient enough to field the criticism, but we were very worried about leading students into the sort of censorious reaction that could damage their careers. But, of course, that decision is not ours to make, and the authors of this book number amongst a growing body of researchers who without fear decided to be faithful to their own curiosity. The discipline still refuses to celebrate them in the way it did its rather mediocre figures of the past, but that, thankfully, is not their main concern.

While the ultra-realist literature can often appear quite abstract, in the vast majority of cases the work of ultra-realist researchers is rooted in face-to-face investigative work with criminals, 'deviants' and victims. Actually meeting and getting to know active criminals tends to display just how idealistic and unworldly so much criminological theory really is. Despite what critical

criminologists have often claimed, many criminals believe their crimes have absolutely no political resonance. When violent offenders, drug dealers, thieves and fraudsters commit crimes, they are really not trying to fight back against the unfairness of capitalism. The true realities that make up the probabilistic contexts in which crime and harm are played out are far more complex.

We had no particularly grand ambitions when we set out on our project. We simply wanted to carry out our research on real-world crime problems, publish it in books and journals, and generally add to the canon of criminological scholarship. On occasion we were mildly acerbic when discussing the empirical and theoretical work of some of our disciplinary colleagues, but at no stage did we over-step the mark or go beyond disciplinary conventions. However, as time passed it became clear that some notable figures within the discipline were keen to censor and misrepresent our work. We were simply not interested in reproducing the discipline's dominant orthodoxies. We wanted to revisit reality and at the same time use new ideas from intellectual fields usually ignored by criminologists. We even had the temerity to introduce a handful of new analytical concepts. We developed a reputation as outsiders.

In truth, this probably has something to do with our shared class background, which clashed with academic criminology's tendency to reflect the concerns – and indeed the underlying fears – of middle-class left-liberals who dominate the discipline. Our outsider status created a range of problems for us, but we also managed to make contacts with others who were equally keen to poke their heads outside the main door of liberalism's criminological cathedral in order to accurately represent the real world.

Perhaps the most gratifying part of our long careers has been to work closely with many talented, open-minded and intellectually ambitious colleagues who, like us, have been willing to defy convention and follow the intellectual track wherever it takes them. Two of those colleagues are the authors of this book, and many others are mentioned within it. Some of these colleagues were once our students, and it has given us a huge amount of pleasure to watch them develop into world-leading criminologists. We still read their work carefully, and the sheer intellectual breadth and depth of their various studies and analyses gives us a vague sense that, even though criminology continues to display manifold problems, there are sections of the discipline that continue to forge ahead to illuminate contemporary crime problems.

For us, Kotzé's and Lloyd's *Making Sense of Ultra-Realism* will act as the definitive introduction to ultra-realism for some time to come. Kotzé and Lloyd have both contributed enormously to the development of ultra-realism,

and they know the field inside out. The book itself, as you're about to discover, is both accessible and a pleasure to read. The authors utilise a range of movies and TV series to show how a number of ultra-realism's core ideas can shed light on various features of everyday life.

In our long academic careers numerous open-minded students from all sorts of backgrounds have told us quite clearly that when it comes to understanding crime and harm, ultra-realism makes far more sense than other schools of criminological thought. There's no doubt that this book is an invaluable introductory text for students at all levels, but the fact of the matter is that ultra-realism is for everybody. We have no desire to maintain control over its development. We welcome the involvement of anyone who cares about accurately representing forms of crime and harm in their relevant contexts.

As Kotzé and Lloyd show, there's no need to be intimidated by the various abstractions of ultra-realism. With a little work and some imagination, anyone can grasp its core concepts and put them to work explaining various features of the world we live in. We welcome you to the book, and we thank the authors for taking the time to write such an accessible and engaging introduction to the ultra-realist perspective.

Simon Winlow, Professor of Criminology,
Northumbria University, UK
Steve Hall, Emeritus Professor of Criminology
February 2022

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Katy Mathers and her colleagues at Emerald for helping us bring this book to life. For stimulating our interest in ultra-realism, we are eternally indebted to Steve Hall and Simon Winlow; your excellent scholarship, collegiality and unwavering support over the years has been invaluable to us and we are forever grateful. We would also like to acknowledge a debt of gratitude to Philip Whitehead, Georgios A. Antonopoulos, Thomas Raymen, Oliver Smith, Anthony Ellis, Luke Telford, Alexandra Hall, Louise Wattis, Georgios Papanicolaou, Victoria Bell, Daniel Briggs and Mark Bushell for their friendship and continued encouragement. For contributing their valuable insights and helpful study tips, we would like to thank all those students who took the time to share their thoughts and experiences with us. Your participation has certainly helped us in our endeavour to make ultra-realism more accessible and we are sure the reader will benefit immeasurably from your efforts.

Justin Kotzé thanks his co-author Anthony Lloyd for his friendship, support, encouragement and, of course, contribution to this book. It has been a joy to work with you on this publication. Finally, and most importantly, Justin would like to thank his wife, Claire. Thank you for everything you do and for your unfaltering love, support and encouragement.

Anthony Lloyd thanks his co-author Justin Kotzé for the friendship, support and continued collaboration. Most importantly, Anthony would like to thank Jo for, well, everything.